

Alexander's Epic March

A new PBS series offers stunning images of the conqueror's route through Egypt, the Near East, and Asia.

by EUGENE N. [BORZA](#)

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT. A Maya Vision Ltd.
Production for Maryland Public Television and the BBC.

A series of four one-hour programs, scheduled to air May 4 and 5, 9:00~1 1:00 P.M. on PBS. Video tapes for home and institutional use are available from PBS Video at 1-800-424-7963.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT: A Journey from Greece to Asia. Michael Wood.
256 pages. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. \$27.50. ISBN 0-520-21307-6.

"TO THIS DAY NO ONE HAS TRACED THE
WHOLE DE ALEXANDER'S GREAT JOURNEY ON
THE GROUND- THAT WAS MY PLAN."

Despite Michael Wood's enormous effort, modern politics prevented him from realizing his goal. Yet this British historian and creator of more than 60 documentaries has come closer to doing so than any of his illustrious predecessors, including the great early twentieth-century British explorer Sir Aurel Stein and the indefatigable mid-century traveler Freya Stark, both of whom intensively explored portions of Alexander's route. We are grateful to have the record of Wood's journey across Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India. It is to his credit that only in Iraq was he prevented by the authorities from following the ground trod by Alexander's army. There were also political difficulties in Greece, Israel, and Egypt, but Wood managed to overcome them.

Except for suggesting some alternate routes, the film does not contribute much to traditional scholarship on Alexander. On an artistic level, however, it is a major achievement that will enrich both scholars and the general public. With stunning images of parts of the world rarely seen by Western eyes, Wood conveys a sense of the extraordinary distances and dramatic campaigns in the difficult country through which Alexander led his army. No book or film has ever before so persuasively conveyed this message.

The effect is cumulative over the four one-hour episodes. The first two segments are a military and cultural travelogue involving the ancient itinerary and the modern peoples who inhabit the Turkish and Near Eastern regions conquered by Alexander. Wood has a keen eye for contemporary life, and, as in his previous series, *Legacy: Origins of Civilization and The Sacred Way* (see [ARCHAEOLOGY](#), July/August 1994, pp. 64-66), he interacts effectively with the locals. His itinerary is occasionally enlivened by on-site interviews with specialists, such as one at the location of the Battle of Issus, the scene of Alexander's victory over the Persian king Darius in 333 BC., during their first head-to-head encounter. On this famous coastal plain, amid the in-trusions of a steel factory, electric power lines, and highway construction, Tulane University professor Kenneth Harl offers an energetic reconstruction of the battle. Later on, the journey into Egypt's Western Desert to retrace Alexander's route to the Siwa Oasis provides, perhaps for the first time, a comprehensive visual record of that dramatic landscape. These film images remind one of Lawrence of Arabia, with the addition of Wood's running historical commentary.

Although the political situation in Iraq prevented him from doing groundlevel examination there, Wood, innovative as always, managed to hitch a ride on a U.S. Air Force AWACS flight that was monitoring the northern "no-fly zone." Within this sensitive military zone is the site of the Battle of Gaugamela, where, in 331 BC, Alexander's army finally defeated Darius' forces in one of the largest and most decisive engagements of antiquity. Wood's discussion of that battle is illustrated from aloft, with a description of the ancient armies' movements through the terrain as seen on the AWACS's radar screens. The itinerary resumes in Iran with Wood's discovery of the route used by a detachment of Alexander's forces to circumvent the Persians' blockade of the pass leading to Persepolis, where the imperial palace complex provides, even in its ruined form, a dramatic backdrop for Wood's account of Alexander's destruction of this symbol of ancient authority in Asia in the spring of 330 BC.

But it is in the third episode, covering the journey through Afghanistan and the central Asian republics, that the film's power becomes evident. With Wood, we are stunned by the present-day devastation of Kabul and the loss through looting of the treasures in the great museum there (see [ARCHAEOLOGY](#); March/April 1996, pp. 42-51). The museum director's comment is touching: "It was as if our mother and father had died. Our whole history was here." From the ruins of Kabul, Wood follows Alexander's route across the towering

Hindu Kush through the formidable Khawak Pass. He travels by Land Rover; then horse, and finally on foot, all the while recounting the ancient writers' descriptions of the suffering endured by Alexander's army from starvation, cold, exhaustion, and altitude sickness. At the head of the 12,000-foot pass, from which the land stretches away into central Asia, Wood notes that after "following Alexander's footsteps up here with this wind you can really feel, whatever you think about him, what an amazing achievement it was to drive an army over these mountains."

In episodes three and four; Wood experiences the push to Samarkand, the return to Afghanistan and the crossing of the Khyber Pass into the northwest frontier, the journey down the Indus, and finally the return trek across the Makran Desert toward Persia. The cinematography is so potent that, even after decades of studying Alexander's career, I understood for the first time the topography of the heretofore impregnable mountain fortress called in antiquity the Rock of Aornos, the modern Pir Sar. Using techniques known today mainly to mountaineers, Alexander's army climbed those steep heights to engage and defeat Indian enemies who had taken refuge there. By seizing Aornos, Alexander accomplished what is said to have thwarted Herakles during his wanderings across the earth. In the long run it was an insignificant military engagement, but the difficulty of the heights, plus the association with Herakles, certainly contributed to the enhancement of Alexander's legendary reputation. Of equal drama is the conqueror's return from the Indus Valley to Persia across the utter desolation of the Makran Desert in southern Pakistan. His journey was so devastating to Alexander's army that it has justifiably been compared to Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. These remote areas are brought to life by Wood's film, enabling those who read and write about Alexander to have a geographical stage on which to place historical characters.

ONE MAJOR THEME THAT EMERGES is the enormous impact of Alexander's life and legend on local people, in coffee houses in northern Greece, in bazaars and tents in central Asia, and along the Indus frontier. The memories exist, deeply embedded in the folk traditions of a vast segment of Earth's peoples. No matter that many of the memories are hostile. Alexander's passing is still regarded as a disaster among the Zoroastrians of central Iran, who believe that his destruction of the ancient Persian Empire was an act of evil. To this day they call him "Alexander the Accursed." I hope the film will provoke cultural anthropologists to conduct a comprehensive study of the Alexander legends recalled by the people who live to day along the conqueror's path.

The viewer is overwhelmed by the scale of the geographical obstacles encountered and overcome, albeit with huge losses, by Alexander's army. We are astounded that the young Macedonian king could have led an army through this alien wilderness while retaining the loyalty of his men through much of it. There are few historical parallels for Alexander's qualities of leadership. Yet, one wonders, what was the point? With Wood as our competent guide we begin to ask, "What was Alexander doing in this part of the world? What did his men think? Why did they follow him?" The viewer must conclude with Wood, lacking evidence to the contrary, that this was a highly personal undertaking without further meaning.

Wood's commentary is for the most part intelligent and dramatic, and occasionally moving. Specialists will find a few matters with which to quarrel. There is, for example, an enigmatic reference to Alexander's "far sighted thinking," which not only contradicts Wood's thesis that there was little point to this expedition, but also flies in the face of the conqueror's well-known lack of interest in administration and planning beyond the most immediate military needs. Wood adheres to an outmoded idea that Alexander was a founder of many cities; the most recent scholarship suggests that he was actually responsible for only six: Alexandria in Egypt, plus five others, long gone, in central Asia. **There is ambiguity about the distinction between Greek and Macedonian, terms that Wood uses indiscriminately even though ancient sources are clear to distinguish between the Greeks and the Macedonians in Alexander's entourage. As time went on, most Greeks were dropped, and the expedition became solely a Macedonian operation.** There is also failure to reflect upon the savage campaign of slaughter inflicted upon the native peoples encountered during his campaigns, particularly those of the Indus Valley. The wholesale killing of civilian populations when there was no military necessity for it transcended even the rather loose wartime conventions of that era. It was a campaign of terror. And there is a curiously indecisive final evaluation of Alexander's career; despite powerful evidence that Wood himself offers of Alexander's amazing qualities of leadership.

As is often the practice with these productions, a book has been issued to accompany the film. Written by Wood and published by the BBC and the University of California Press, it lacks the grace of the television production, and its intended audience is not clear. It is not very interesting as a piece of travel literature until it gets to north Afghanistan, where, coincidentally, the film comes alive. Most people will find it an uneven and occasionally inaccurate account of Alexander's career.

Some lapses in historical accuracy, while perhaps acceptable in the film where they do not diminish the visual impact, have no place on a printed page. At one point the date of the deaths of Alexander's wife Roxanne and son Alexander IV is given as 314 BC, at another 313 (the correct date is 311/310). There is a slightly garbled account of Alexander's plans, which, according to the first-century B C writer Diodorus Siculus, did not include the conquest of Arabia, as Wood alleges. (Another ancient writer; Arrian, reports that Alexander planned a circumnavigation of the Arabian peninsula, a natural extension of his exploration of the coastlines from India to Africa.)

As in the film, there is confusion between Greeks and Macedonians. During the earlier part of Alexander's campaign, the army contained important contingents of Greek allies and mercenaries, but in time most of these were replaced Macedonian and Asian troops. It is simply incorrect to call Alexander's army Greek. In one place Wood refers to the army's "Greek high command," though there were only a handful of important Greek commanders and a few pages later it is the "Macedonian high command" that draws our attention. Many American readers would be startled to learn that "50 degrees" is a "ferocious" temperature in northern Iraq, unless told that the measurement is Celsius, not Fahrenheit. One wishes that the author and his editor had brought to the book the same careful attention to detail that they brought to the film.

There are dozens of color illustrations, but many are stock photos drawn from the usual archival and museum sources, and too few are of the interesting places and peoples encountered by Wood in his journey. I often longed for a photograph to accompany the description of some distant place. The most interesting images were taken by Wood himself, for example, in the Makran Desert, at the Khawak Pass, among the people of Iran and Afghanistan, and from the heights of Pir Sar. Wood has some creative ideas that will test traditional scholarship. He knows the ancient sources on Alexander; has read and understood much of the best modern scholarly literature, and has the enormous advantage of having walked the ground, a modern disciple of the ancient historian Polybius who advised historians to abandon their libraries and study in the field. There are several fresh interpretations of Alexander's route. If Wood is correct about the conqueror's path from the Siwa Oasis to the Nile Valley, I will have to rethink my own arguments concerning it, published nearly 30 years ago. Wood's exploration of the highland route taken by the conqueror's elite troops around the enemy forces blocking the Persian Gates

leading to Persepolis may have finally resolved the outstanding questions concerning that event. And, as mentioned earlier, his exploration of the Macedonian army's campaign at the formidable Rock of Aornos not only confirms Sir Aurel Stein's earlier survey of the area, but gives us a remarkable photographic record of the investigation. One hopes that Wood will address these problems in more detail in print, thereby making an important contribution to scholarship concerning Alexander's journey.

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